

Memphis Yellow Fever Essay

Introduction

It was a humid August day, balmy as it usually was in the late Summer along the Mississippi. Riverboats peacefully glided through the waters, transporting cattle, alcohol, and other goods loaded upon the newly constructed railroads or the many riverboats that traveled through the city, to be transported to the great cities of the Midwest and Atlantic seaboard, or moved out to the distant frontiers. The streets bustled with activity; almost fifty thousand people lived between its city limits, making a living off of the many opportunities a thriving city gave. But this day would be marred with shocking and appalling headlines across the city's newspapers. It is remembered in history as the day that the first official death in Memphis of yellow fever was reluctantly announced. (1)

The Memphis yellow fever outbreak was a devastating scourge that transformed Memphis, one of the few economic success stories of the Reconstruction era South, into a husk of its former self. Ten percent of its pre-outbreak population had perished, along with millions of dollars worth of economic activity that never took place or could never occur with the reputation Memphis accrued. This essay aims to summarize the story of the Memphis yellow fever outbreak while showing the epidemic's effects on the city's economy, populace, and culture.

Yellow fever in America

America was no stranger to Yellow Fever. The disease, which originated in West Africa was transported to America from commercial and slave ships, with a few outbreaks occurring from the late

1680s onwards. However, the first significant outbreak that truly shocked the nation's consciousness arose in the then-capital of the newly established United States of America, Philadelphia—occurring during the early days of August through October. Yellow fever ravaged the city, officially killing 5,000 people out of the then population of 50,000, but probably more deaths went unreported due to the unreliable recordkeeping of the time. So terrible was the affliction that gripped the city that President Washington and his cabinet had to flee to avoid the scourge. This epidemic would not just affect Philadelphia, attacking New York and other ports on the Eastern seaboard at the same time. (1)

Other notable outbreaks would occur during the 1790s, including a much larger contagion across the nation's largest cities in 1798, which killed upwards of eight-thousand people. Other pandemics would take place across other major port cities in America, such as Baltimore and New Orleans from the early years of the nineteenth century to the eve of the Civil War. Southern port cities were especially prone to the disease, becoming known as vectors, with snide declarations from sometimes politically motivated northerners about the “dirty cities of *that* region”.(2)

During the Civil War, small yellow fever outbreaks took place and were larger killers than enemy bullets of Civil War armies. Along with the other scourges of Malaria, tuberculosis, and other tropical diseases that thrived in the swampy environment of the South. Soldiers from the north who were acclimated to the common flu and other such Midwestern maladies simply weren't able to cope. Yellow fever was especially distressing to soldiers west of the Mississippi, Southern and Northern alike. One major outbreak in New Orleans almost destroyed the Union's local Navy installation, just as general Grant had seized Vicksburg. Had it not been neatly managed by commanding General Farragut, then the history of the erstwhile successful Union campaign may have had a much more unsatisfying ending. (3)

The beginnings of the Pandemic:

When word that yellow fever was breaking out in the British West Indies reached the continental United States, fear spread throughout the River cities, including Memphis. Some men with foresight sought to quarantine the city, many averred that such an “overreaction” would damage the economy, especially since the epidemic had not yet even reached the shores of the United States. Some, such as Health Commissioner R.W Mitchell, called for an early quarantine, but the fears of the businessmen, who had seen many health measures of the kind that Mitchell suggested fail to prevent disease outbreaks and seen said measures damage their economies would resist calls by the health board for such an action. (1)

In July 1878, the first case of Yellow Fever was reported in New Orleans, marking the beginning of the Mississippi Yellow fever epidemic of 1878. Immediately, there were heightened calls to the Memphis city government to take the fever seriously and close off travel to the South, but with the threat of bankruptcy hanging over the city government, it was no wonder they were reluctant. If a shutdown did take place, it could damage the trade that Memphis relied on. Besides, quarantines had failed to protect many surrounding cities from the aftershocks of New Orleans's other brushes with the disease. Ultimately, a quarantine from New Orleans was instituted, but it had numerous loopholes and failed to keep people out of the city. (2)

When word came in late July that the fever had reached nearby Grenada, Mississippi, the health board of Memphis immediately dispatched two doctors to check the situation. The message they returned was grim. While Grenada desperately attempted to dissuade any thought that their medical situation had gotten out of control, they were swamped with death and sickness. Newspapers from many towns over were peppered with pleas for doctors and nurses. The mood in Memphis became somber. It was only a matter of time until the plague sunk its tendrils into the city, and the residents who had the means began to pack up and flee in all directions. (3)

The Plague meets Memphis

While the oft-repeated starting point of the pandemic in Memphis was the death of Kate Bionda, or perhaps her infection by the hands of an upstream traveler, in truth, the Fever had probably already made its way through the city, disguising itself among the other ailments that regularly wound through the city. Doctors had encountered cases in July and decided not to report them for fear of inflaming the already strained public consciousness. (1)

The news of Mrs . Bionda's demise would send Memphis into a frenzy. Thousands packed the roads, leaving their homes in a panic for fear of the terrible plague. Streets out of the city were the sites of countless battles between rival families for right-of-way, but most were silent, their eyes scanning the crowds for signs of the diseased. Disease cases would begin to be reported in the days following Mrs. Bionda's death, first ten, then twenty, then on the third day around thirty. Two weeks later, it was in the thousands. (2)

The refugees would not find comfort easily. Many cities would block themselves from those fleeing Memphis, a situation which would only be exacerbated as the pandemic fully went underway. Railcars became the temporary home of thousands, while roving bands of distressed people would sleep in fields and woods. These were the ones who suffered the least, compared to those who had to wait on cramped riverboats, with the dying surrounding them. Towns refused many refugees entry, and many Memphians found themselves staring down the barrels of rifles at the gates of towns.

The pandemic progresses:

As the pandemic progressed, the city was silent and appeared as empty as a graveyard. Busy boulevards and shopping districts lay empty. Public thoroughfares were silent, with only a few brave souls who sought to aid those afflicted with the disease occasionally going from house to house, where they would find the residents of the city. Their state of them varied. Some simply sat in dark, empty houses slowly dying from the disease. Others cried for help from the doctors, creating heart-wrenching scenes where doctors had to choose between different homes to aid, for their time was limited, and volunteers were few. (1)

The Plague over Memphis saw unique changes, or reinforcements, of traditional Southern ways of government and social order. With much of the police force coming down with the fever, Black men would be inaugurated as officers, if only temporarily. (Blacks were not affected to the degree whites were by the Pandemic, having some sort of natural immunity. While there was still a grim figure for them; over a thousand dead, it didn't arrive at the same devastating number for the White population). Black citizens were increasingly relied upon to keep the city running as the pandemic wore on, working as gravediggers or as nurses in the short-staffed ranks of nurses. The social situation of Blacks also seemed to lend to them becoming more assertive and less servile. Hagglng for prices and refusal to engage in the dirtiest work were among these seemingly new practices. (2)

Nurses would prove to be a challenge to the conservative sensibilities of the city's residents. Many of these nurses were admittedly not the best of people; the alcohol they were given to help patients were drunk, items were stolen from homes, and feuds with each other often distracted from the dying patients who so desperately needed them. The contrast between these women and the seemingly pure and prim Nuns of the Catholic and Episcopal churches, who selflessly aided the sick and dying was aptly pointed out by many residents of the time. (2)

But this doesn't tell the whole story. While many nurses were undeniably abusive, others were among the outbreak's heroes. Women from high-class backgrounds who volunteered their efforts saw horrible conditions, and how the class structure of the city led to many not only not getting the help that they needed, but actively being neglected for their position. One such woman, Mrs. Pelchin of Houston, Texas, made sure to note her experiences with the doctors and residents of the city. While she derided many of the corrupt nurses, she and many others in her narrative were clean and upright, high-class and prim ladies who did their best with what little was given. She was especially critical of many physicians, who were dismissive of nurses and often got into rows with them over trivial matters. (3)

There were other heroes of the outbreak. Annie Cook allowed her restaurant to be used to treat people who had come down with a fever. When she died, she was given a grave that specially marked out her contributions to the campaign to aid the city in its most trying hour of need. Doctors of the Howard Association, a group of physicians that styled themselves after an organization that emerged in New Orleans during their yellow fever pandemic, also overwhelmingly put their own lives on the line. These physicians would themselves go to great lengths for their patients, working long and arduous shifts and like the nurses enduring horrifying sights doing right by their patients.

Domestic tranquility was surprisingly preserved during the pandemic. With so much property simply left behind after the flight of thousands of the city's residents, many believed that mass looting would take place. This fear would indirectly lead to the calling up of the local militia units to preserve the property of the city's residents, and they would be successful in preventing looting on a mass scale. These militias would fill in the gaps that the disease-ridden police simply couldn't, and ironically may have helped keep crime to a level lower than the city's usual rate.

The pandemic would eventually end, though not after stretching the city to its breaking point. Thousands had died, filling cemeteries to overflow. Many more had fallen sick, some with crippling organ damage that would later claim their lives. Churches were devastated, with almost entire parishes being wiped out. The police and fire departments had been rendered barely functional only with the conscription of black men. Numerous physicians had died, along with many others who had cared for the sick. The frosts of early fall were sorely needed, and when they came, the people of Memphis rejoiced. After a few touches of frost, the city's medical examiners joyfully declared the epidemic over on October the nineteenth, 1878. (2)

The aftermath

The major political and social change that took place in Memphis following the pandemic was the total collapse of the city politically. What had once been a stronghold of Reconstruction Republicanism had lost so much of its population that it was stripped of its independence as a city, and was thus subjected to the same political trends of post-Reconstruction politics that had been taking place across the rest of Tennessee. Never again would the city resemble the midwestern or Atlantic port city in its ward politics, nor would its black population regain its place on the political totem pole. (1)

Demographically, the city was devastated. The wealthier white population had taken the opportunities they had to flee Memphis, leaving the poorer quarters of the city to suffer. Given that the outbreak primarily affected whites, this meant that the poorest of that demographic were those that suffered the brunt of the pandemic, and the casualties were nauseating. Of the seven-thousand whites that stayed, around four thousand succumbed to the fever. Many of these poor whites were Irish, and the pandemic seemed to spurn this growing demographic to decamp to greener pastures. (2)

After the pandemic, there was an immense effort to clean the city up. Memphis had already earned a negative reputation as a dirty city, and the pandemic had certainly not helped in changing that perception. A massive new sewer system was built at great cost, one which would ironically become the envy of many cities not only in the South but even the North. Highlighting this change was writer Mark Twain, who in the late 1880s while visiting the city noted its beauty and splendid change from its early years. (4)

However, Memphis much of its opportunities afforded to it by its unique position on the Mississippi river. It had once been a rapidly growing city, and very cosmopolitan for a Southern metropolis, but the epidemic ended that. The institution of the Shelby county taxing district regime ensured that Memphis would remain a Southern elite-dominated city, and would not become like those Northern, cosmopolitan, diverse, and undoubtedly wealthy cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, or New York. (5)

Source List:

Introduction:

[\(1\) The first victim of the Memphis yellow fever epidemic dies - HISTORY](#)

Yellow Fever in America:

(1) <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/fever-major-american-epidemics-of-yellow-fever/>

(2) Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War, by Andrew McIlwaine pg 15-17

(3) [New Orleans' Yellow Fever Outbreak of the 1800s \(passporthealthglobal.com\)](http://passporthealthglobal.com), and the aforementioned Mosquito soldiers, Chapter six I believe. (I am the one who sources).

[Report of the yellow fever epidemic of 1873, Shreveport, La. / \(nih.gov\)](http://nih.gov)

The Plague meets Memphis

(1); [YELLOW JACK: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis, Tennessee on JSTOR](http://JSTOR), The American plague pg. 44-49

(2) aforementioned source mentions these details

(3) Race, Power, and political Emergence

The Pandemic progresses

(1); [YELLOWJACK: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 in Memphis, Tennessee on JSTOR](http://JSTOR)

(2) Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis by Sharon D. Wright

(3) [Southern Conservatism at Work: Women, Nurses, and the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis on JSTOR](http://JSTOR)

Aftermath:

(1) [Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History: The Saga of Memphis, Tennessee, 1850-1880 on JSTOR](http://JSTOR)

- (2) Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis, by Sharon D. Wright, pages 18-20.
- (3)[Southern Conservatism at Work: Women, Nurses, and the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Memphis on JSTOR](#)
- (4)[Mark Twain Visits Tennessee \(mtsu.edu\)](#)
- (5)[Memphis Fights the Yellow Fever | AMERICAN HERITAGE](#)